



WR: Mysteries of the Organism: Anarchist Realism and Critical Quandaries

Richard Porton

July 2011

Richard Porton
WR: Mysteries of the Organism: Anarchist Realism and Critical
Quandaries
July 2011

<http://www.lolajournal.com/1/wr.html>

lib.anarhija.net

Dušan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, while something of a *cause célèbre* upon its release in 1971, could certainly be dismissed as dated if it was merely the sexual liberationist tract promoted by its adherents – and scorned by its detractors – during Makavejev's heyday on the repertory circuit in the '70s. Some of the more insightful recent commentary on *WR* in fact struggles against reductionist interpretations – a necessary task since the film itself, with its reinvention of intellectual montage and embrace of an essayistic, manic digressiveness, is structured to forestall facile commentary. Makavejev's playful, allusive film, an apt case study for testing the capabilities of a robustly contextualist criticism, cries out for what, following Clifford Geertz, social scientists (as well as a recent generation of literary critics) refer to as 'thick description'. For resourceful critics, *WR* is also the perfect vehicle for flights of essayistic fancy. Raymond Durgnat, a famously digressive critic himself,

compared Makavejev's magnum opus to an 'adventure playground'. Given Durgnat's fondness for idiosyncratic critical detours, his BFI monograph on *WR* represents a near-seamless fusion of author and subject matter.¹

Eminently suitable for critical foraging, *WR* has been discussed from a dizzying array of perspectives: the vantage points of Reichian psychoanalysis (with contributions from both disgruntled Reichians as well as less orthodox disciples of the heterodox psychoanalyst)²; the ambiguous legacy of Sixties counterculture; film culture and politics in the former Yugoslavia; and Makavejev's conflation of fiction and documentary, among others.³ Since all of these aesthetic and political tributaries reflect an anti-authoritarian impetus, it is surprising that critical literature on the film hasn't yielded a full-fledged anarchist analysis – even though there are inklings of one in some of Durgnat's observations, Amos Vogel's conclusion that Milena Dravić's speeches include some of the 'saddest, most disillusioned indictments yet offered against Stalinism in any film', and Makavejev's own summation of the film as a condemnation of 'the pornographic essence of any system of authority and power over others'.⁴ This is not to say that anarchism provides some sort

¹ Raymond Durgnat, *WR – Mysteries of the Organism* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

² For example, James De Meo, director of the Orgone Biophysical Research Lab in Ashland, Oregon has little hesitation in terming *WR* 'pornographic' and a 'deliberately distorted misrepresentation' of Reich's life. See his 'Critical Review: *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*'. Despite a mere fleeting reference to Makavejev in a footnote, the Reichian Myron Sharaf, interviewed in the film, is clearly more sympathetic. See Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

³ See, for example, Pavle Levi, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*; Lorraine Mortimer, *Terror and Joy: The Films of Dusan Makavejev* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Paul Arthur, 'Escape from Freedom: The Film of Dusan Makavejev', *Cineaste* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2001).

⁴ Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 155.

film that – to employ a film studies cliché – not only 'resists closure' but also resists authority, whether political or personal, in every shot. Within this freewheeling universe of discourse, the legacy of Wilhelm Reich becomes a multivalent prism¹⁶ that ultimately sheds light on a largely submerged anarchist history.

¹⁶ And, truth be told, contradictions abound when one considers disparities between Reich's 'legacy' and the eccentric psychoanalyst's actual political evolution. In a recently published book, Christopher Turner chronicles Reich's revulsion towards a number of American anarchists, among them Paul Goodman and Dwight Macdonald, who embraced his work during the 1940s. According to Turner, Reich demanded that 'Goodman stop linking his name with "anarchists and libertarians."' Turner also observes that 'For all his rhetoric of orgasms, Reich was surprisingly puritanical: he was against pornography and dirty jokes (which he thought would become obsolete after the sexual revolution), abhorred homosexuality, and preferred that sex not be detached from love'. Goodman was openly bisexual and Turner informs us that Reich sent him to Alexander Lowen 'to be cured'. See Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 244-251.

uationist lingo, achieved the status of ‘the concentrated spectacle’.¹⁴ Despite an awareness of this vicious circle, it seems unfair to accuse Makavejev of resignation, stoic or otherwise. Even when, at the film’s conclusion, the unfortunate Milena ends up decapitated by her Leninist paramour, she is able to speak on the dissecting table – proclaiming that V.I. was a ‘genuine red fascist’. A zealot even as a corpse, she proclaims that she is not ashamed of her ‘Communist past’. As a spectral presence, she thereby affirms the coupling of Communism and Fascism formulated in Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* without, however zealously deluded, capitulating to a quiescent conservatism.

While *WR*’s intricate skein of political paradoxes have intrigued many critics, some usually lucid voices could not cope with Makavejev’s formal breakthrough. An admirer of *Man is Not a Bird* and *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967), the late Robin Wood sniffed that *WR* offers a ‘stylised, mostly comic charade ... while largely denying the audience the sympathetic involvement of the earlier films ... The focus is on the ludicrous excesses of Reich’s later years ... Makavejev thereby undercuts Reich’s apparent endorsement of “liberation” without providing a rational critique of it’.¹⁵ In retrospect, what is at fault here is less Makavejev’s indifference to an audience’s ‘sympathetic involvement’ than the weakness of a critical practice more bound up with Leavisite ‘moral seriousness’ than an aesthetic that emphasises disjunctiveness, dialogue and paradox. What remains exhilarating (and no doubt unsettling to many) about *WR* forty years after its release is the fact that the film provides the audience tools with which it can formulate its own rational critique. Durgnat’s metaphor of the ‘adventure playground’ is more apt than ever in locating the locus of a

¹⁴ For a synthesis of Situationist thought and Reichian ‘character analysis’, see Jean-Pierre Voyer, *Reich: How to Use*. For another fusion of libertarian Marxism and Reich, see Maurice Brinton, *The Irrational in Politics*.

¹⁵ Robin Wood, ‘Dusan Makavejev’, in Richard Roud ed., *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (London: Secker and Warburg 1980), p. 656.

of Rosetta Stone for decoding *WR* in a glib or ‘totalising’ manner. Yet Makavejev’s resistance to the Manichean platitudes of the Cold War era – abjuring both Western consumer capitalism and Eastern European state socialism – is quite congruent with a contemporary anarchist ethos that oscillates – as *WR* itself does – between utopian exuberance and melancholy resignation. The sad contours of Wilhelm Reich’s life, documented in the film’s non-fiction interludes that chronicle the travails of a man expelled from both the German Communist Party and the International Psychoanalytic Association, reinforce assumptions that anarchism is at the heart of the film’s political unconscious.

If *WR* has an anarchist thrust, it is conveyed slyly through an accretion of paradoxes that accelerate gradually within Makavejev’s sardonic deployment of montage. Stale assumptions concerning the consumerist West and the benighted East are imploded through a series of incongruous transitions and juxtapositions. Tuli Kupferberg, the anarchist poet best known for his work with The Fugs, opens the film with a mournful piece of comic verse that contains the phrase ‘out of paradoxes, man creates our world’. (While commentators often refer to Kupferberg’s poem as doggerel, this sentiment shares affinities with proto-anarchist William’s Blake’s cosmology – e.g. ‘Without contraries is no progression’, a famous line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) A desire to traverse standard ideological assumptions underlines a sequence in which Reich’s daughter, Eva Reich-Moise, standing outside her farmhouse in rural New England, declares that the world went awry after her father’s death. A cut to a traveling shot of the prison where Reich was incarcerated is accompanied by what Durgnat terms an ‘accordion and zither duet in a silvery-sounding peasant waltz’, an incongruously jaunty ditty that almost strives to re-locate the grim penitentiary in the zanier fictional realm of Yugoslavian political infighting that dominates the latter half of the film. As the voice-over informs us that ‘Reich died a free man’, there is a transition to a re-enactment of the pulping and incineration of many of Reich’s books by the FDA

(Food and Drug Administration) in lower Manhattan during both the late 1950s and early 1960s. This gloss on a shameful episode in U.S. censorship, eerily reminiscent of suppression of dissident literature in the Eastern Bloc during the Communist era, is followed by Reich-Moise's fiercely contradictory assessment of the political antinomies of her era and a final valedictory to her father.

On the one hand, Reich-Moise's assertion that individuals are manufactured into good state citizens in the Soviet Union superficially resembles right-wing anti-Communist rhetoric (and her claim that 'nobody smiles in Russia' resembles a similar formulation made by Ayn Rand before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the blacklist era). But when Makavejev asks her about the 'American Dream', she immediately proclaims that the 'American Dream is dead'. Unlike Rand, Reich-Moise is clearly not a right-wing libertarian but a refugee from urban strife whose communitarian ideals hark back to certain ideals espoused by nineteenth-century American individualist anarchists – especially a penchant for agrarian self-sufficiency – and Peter Kropotkin's vision of anarchist communism.⁵

There's little doubt that autocratic state socialism sullied and distorted complex terms such as 'individualism' (which was almost always prefaced with the admonitory adjective 'bourgeois') and 'collective' – which, in Eastern Europe, became synonymous with the imperatives of the authoritarian state. Within both the lexicon of the left and anarchist circles, individualism is a particularly fraught and contradictory term. Whether Left Hegelian Max Stirner, best known for his eccentric tract *The Ego and Its Own*, should be considered an anarchist at all still inspires a certain amount of ferocious debate within the anarchist milieu. In Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible*, an expansive history of anarchism that finds room

⁵ There are certain affinities between Reich-Moise's appearance in *WR* and that of Mildred Loomis, an aging, back-to-the-land anarchist individualist, in Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler's documentary, *Anarchism in America* (1983).

army regalia and fondling a rifle with masturbatory frenzy. Durgnat views this montage cluster as a 'pre-text, a bare foundation for a quite complex integration by the spectator's mind'. More tangibly, this sequence's trajectory can be described as a dizzying dance of straightforward tumescence (Buckley), sublimation as ideologically warped tumescence (Stalin), and repressive detumescence and/or mock tumescence (the mental patient and Tuli K.). In other words, to recast the phallic motifs, with their implied correlations to the healthy sexuality promoted by Reich in *The Function of the Orgasm* and the critique of political cum sexual repression in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, utopian possibilities are incessantly disrupted (analogous to the motif Durgnat labels 'Communismus Interruptus') by dystopian realities.

Makavejev's unwillingness to make a choice between revolutionary optimism and salutary pessimism doubtless inspired Joan Mellen's glib dismissal of *WR* as an exercise in 'fashionable despair'.¹² Accusations of left melancholy aside, it is more reasonable to argue that Makavejev's ambivalence on the subject of revolutionary zeal reflects hard-won lessons concerning a malaise discussed by Russell Jacoby: the realisation by Reich and other radical Freudians such as Otto Gross that: "authoritarianism infested and distorted the aims of the revolutionaries themselves. The revolutions of the past failed, Gross declared, because the revolutionaries harbored an authoritarianism bred by the patriarchal family. They secretly loved the authority they subverted and reestablished domination when they were able."¹³

In rather literal terms, the footage of throngs of Chinese Maoists brandishing the Little Red Book (which follows Milena's exhortation on 'free love') reinforces a fear of revolutionary fervour that has not only become authoritarian but, has long ago, to employ Sit-

¹² Joan Mellen, 'WR: Mysteries of the Organism', *Cineaste* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1971-1972), p. 18.

¹³ Russell Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1983), p. 43.

neer and Stalinist temptations (themes pursued in *Man is Not a Bird* (1965) – Makavejev’s ribald portrait of a Serbian copper factory).

In a characteristically paradoxical manoeuvre, the most wholeheartedly anarchist exhortations are mouthed by a drunken worker and sexist lout named Radmilovic. Verbally assaulting Milena with impassioned rants against ‘Marx Factor’ and the ‘Red Bourgeoisie’, it is no wonder that many critics invoke Milovan Djilas’ concept of the ‘New Class’. Expelled from the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1954, Djilas’ assertion that cadres in Communist countries formed a bureaucratic elite that maintained power *over* the working class was, for true believers, the secular equivalent of blasphemy. However boorish, Radmilovic is the film’s anti-hierarchical dynamo, a straightforward champion of the Bakhtinian ‘lower bodily stratum’ and advocate of a post-syndicalist ‘refusal of work’ who interrupts the dour spectacle of V.I. and Milena’s romantic interlude by crashing into their bedroom and nailing the clueless Russian into the wardrobe.

Unlike Western European post ’68 films such as Godard and Gorin’s *Tout va bien* (1972) – a film which advocates a less reified mode of workers’ control than the one that briefly thrived in Yugoslavia – there is not a smidgen of agitprop in *WR*. This is not only because Makavejev, intimately familiar with the doublespeak of ‘actually existing socialism’, rejects political bromides in an open-ended manner. It is also because Makavejev’s penchant for synthesising ribaldry and melancholy belongs to a distinctly Balkan tradition that is more carnivalesque than hortatory. As the film’s montage becomes more frenzied towards the film’s end, it begins to resemble the most delirious film never made by Eisenstein; a manic feast of loopy ‘tonal’ and ‘overtonal’ thematic collisions. One case in point involves furious crosscutting between an artist constructing a plaster cast of *Screw* co-editor Jim Buckley’s penis, footage culled from Mikhail Chiaureli’s *The Vow* (1946) featuring an actor impersonating Stalin as benevolent patriarch, an anguished mental patient beating his head against a wall, and Tuli Kupferberg, dressed in

for almost every left-libertarian tendency, Stirner (despite his enshrinement of the ‘primacy of the unique individual’) is deemed an essential figure within the anarchist tradition. *The Ego and Its Own*, a fascinating if often maddening book, does not merely trumpet the virtues of the autonomous self but ultimately comes down in favor of a ‘union of egoists’ (a stance congenial to artistically minded anarchists such as Oscar Wilde and Emma Goldman).⁶ From a practical viewpoint, however, Kropotkin’s ‘communal individualism’, tied to a cooperative notion of ‘mutual aid’, has proved much more influential.

WR’s slightly tongue-in-cheek treatment of the Reichian-influenced therapies of the 1960s, which many people believed degenerated into New Age narcissism when the ostracised doctor’s disciples transformed the master’s work into disciplines like Gestalt therapy and Bioenergetics, reveal a creative tension between a Stirnerian ‘communist egoism’ and an insular politics of the self. The chasm between the socialist Reich of the Thirties, advocate of ‘work democracy’, and the New Reichians of the Sixties becomes clear in a sequence that follows calm explanations of somatic therapies by Drs. Alexander Lowen and Myron Sharaf. A woman in the midst of a tension-releasing exercises grasps furiously at a towel while exclaiming, ‘Give it to Me! It’s mine’. Durgnat postulates that this maniacal intensity might correspond to a ‘some mad, yet *deep*, fusion of *body*, *desire*, and *property*, in a word “possessive individualism”’.⁷ Alternately, there might be a *modus operandi* to align this woman’s angry desires with the playful polemic published by an American Situationist group For Ourselves during the Seventies: *The Right to Be Greedy: Theses on the Practical Necessity of Demanding Everything* – a document that interweaves Stirnerian egoism and Debordian Situationist tenets. This manifesto differentiates be-

⁶ See Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. London : Fontana Press (Harper Collins), 1993, pp. 224-5.

⁷ Durgnat, p. 23.

tween 'narrow greed' – 'a holdover from times of natural scarcity ... represented in the form of power commodities, sex (objects)' and 'communist egoism ... the egoism which wants nothing so much as other egos; of that greed which is greedy to love'.⁸ Of course, For Ourselves' anticipation of an imminent era of 'post-scarcity' might appear antiquated during the ongoing Great Recession, as well as a betrayal of the working-class anarchism pioneered by Bakunin and his disciples during the nineteenth century. Peter Marin's fear that the more authoritarian offshoots of the New Age (e.g. est) entailed a 'denial of history and the larger community',⁹ that ignored the fact that 'human fulfillment hinges on much more than our usual notions of private pleasure or self-actualisation' expressed the wariness of many who feared that the path taken by Neo-Reichians was more redolent of fascist than left-leaning tendencies.

WR's Eastern European fictional narrative offers an equal number of multi-layered paradoxes. Milena (who shares the name of the actress who plays her, Milena Dravić), is the driving libidinal force of the latter half of the film, a Yugoslav feminist activist and sexual revolutionary who makes clear that Reichian theory should be wedded to orgasmic practice. Yet when pontificating about 'free love' in a vaguely Renoiresque courtyard, she comes off as a party hack spouting liberatory slogans: 'Our road to the future must be life-positive socialism must not exclude human pleasure from its program'. Invoking the spirit of Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet feminist whose reformist suggestions for implementing sexual equality were quickly jettisoned by the Leninist regime, she argues that the October Revolution failed when it abandoned the promotion of free love; what Marxist humanists used to label 'the subjective factor'. Her authoritarian paeans to sexual freedom pigeonhole her as

⁸ See For Ourselves, *The Right to be Greedy: Theses on the Practical Necessity of Demanding Everything* (Theses 6 and 8).

⁹ Peter Marin, 'The New Narcissism', anthologised in *Freedom and Its Discontents: Reflections on Four Decades of American Moral Experience* (South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1995 p. 45).

a peculiarly repressed apostle of emancipatory desires. As Durgnat quips, she resembles 'Germaine Greer and Margaret Thatcher rolled into one'.¹⁰

Oddly enough, the phrase 'free love', at least to certain ears, is more redolent of Victoriana than the writings of Kollontai – a quaintly libertarian motto evoking anti-authoritarian figures such as Edward Carpenter (1844-1929),¹¹ the gay rights pioneer and Whitmanic mystic who proclaimed that 'Eros is the great leveler'. Milena's theoretical enthusiasm for free love is not matched by an equally vigorous sexual athleticism. She seems to regard the concrete orgasmic pleasure experienced by her roommate Jagoda as slightly vulgar. Jagoda's noisy romps with her boyfriend, Ljuba the Cock, imbue the film with an earthy comic brio that remains unaffixed to any preordained ideological agenda.

In terms of *WR*'s extrinsic narrative concerns, Milena's sexual politics are compromised by her infatuation with a visiting Russian ice skater, the facetiously named V.I. (as in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin). From an allegorical perspective, Milena's oscillation between reformist zeal thinly disguised as a Yugoslav-style 'revolution within a revolution' and a man who embodies Soviet rigidity mirrors the contradictions of Tito's rupture with Stalinism. For anarchists, the Yugoslav regime's rhetorical embrace of workers' control and self-management exemplified a statist co-optation of anarcho-syndicalist ideals. Appropriating the jargon of libertarian socialism, the Yugoslav Federal Assembly passed a legislative act in 1950 entitled 'Basic Law on the Management of State Economic Enterprises and Higher Economic Associations by the Work Collectives'. An ideal that once corresponded to workers' spontaneity 'from below' congealed into a state-ordained legislative dictate. Like Milena, Yugoslavia was caught between a faux-libertarian ve-

¹⁰ Durgnat, p. 33.

¹¹ See Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London and New York: Verso, 2008).